INSIDE: RICK BASS GETS THE EARLY BIRDS

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SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER 2010

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HERITAGE A young hunter asks his grandfather for shooting tips during a late-October pheasant hunt. See more family hunting shots in our photo essay on page 18. Photo by Tom Dickson.

FRONT COVER Each year a few lucky hunters win SuperTags for bighorn sheep and other species. See page 14. Photo by Tony Bynum.

NRCS conserves grasslands

In the July-August issue of *Montana Outdoors*, the article "Keeping the Grass in Grasslands" featured the work of many entities to sustain grassland and wildlife diversity in eastern Montana. I would also call your readers' attention to the significant efforts being made by the Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which provides conservation technical and financial assistance to private landowners, who participate voluntarily.

Farm Bill programs administered by NRCS are focused on conserving and improving natural resources, including grasslands. In the past three years, NRCS has worked with Montana landowners to implement nearly 1.1 million acres of prescribed grazing plans to sustain and improve native rangelands. NRCS has directed $5.2 million in its Grassland Reserve Program to acquire easements and rental agreements that protect native grasslands from development in three Montana counties. The agency has recently launched its $3.2 million Sage-Grouse Initiative in Montana, enrolling 81,000 acres to improve prairie conditions. And under its Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative, NRCS provided $69,000 in 2009 to restore degraded native grasslands in Phillips County.

As the landscape changes and natural resource issues arise, NRCS will continue to work with private landowners to meet their needs while conserving natural resources. Thank you for putting out an excellent magazine and keeping Montanans informed.

Joyce Swartzendruber
NRCS State Conservationist
Bozeman

One hungry bull snake

One Sunday afternoon in July, I pulled over at the Loma Bridge Fishing Access Site just outside the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument north of Fort Benton. My plan was to photograph cliff swallows tending their nests tucked in below the bridge. What I found was a magnificent bull snake about 5 feet long "fishing" for cliff swallows. It had slithered along the road, then down the side of the bridge, and was clinging to the hard mud nests with its body.

For over two hours I watched the snake slink in and out of the nests and consume swallow chicks, with one bulge after another running down its body. When one angry adult swallow dared to swoop in to disrupt its dining, the snake grabbed the bird out of the air and ate it, too. When the snake finally had its fill, it loosened itself from the nests and dropped straight down into the rushing river, 30 feet below, and swam off.

Adam S. Johnson
Great Falls

COURTESY ADAM S. JOHNSON

Beware the blue grouse

My son Jeff, his friend Steve, and I were bear hunting last spring near Red Lodge. Jeff hiked in one direction while Steve and I drove up a U.S. Forest Service road to check out a different area. We parked in a pullout and had just stepped out of the pickup when I saw, about 20 yards behind us, a male blue grouse walking across the road. He was making soft hooting sounds followed by light cackles.

I am a high school science teacher in Roberts and have been hunting, fishing, and studying wildlife my entire life. Sometimes for fun I mimic wildlife sounds with my mouth, and I decided to imitate the grouse. He stopped immediately and seemed interested. After a couple of minutes he cautiously began to approach, eventually drawing to within a few feet of us. The more I imitated his sounds, the more irritated he became. I took off my cap, knelt down, and presented it to him. That was all it took. With his yellow eye cones flared, he flogged my hat with his wings and attacked my hand with his beak. He continued this aggressive behavior for about ten minutes before I figured he was probably getting tired and I should quit irritating him.

After removing our gear from the truck, Steve and I began hiking up a trail to look for bear sign. The blue grouse was not through with us, however. He stayed close as we walked, eyeing us the whole time. He seemed to think we were his enemies. He followed us through the trees for several hundred yards, falling a little behind before running to catch up. When we crossed a creek, we thought the grouse would surely give up. Then we heard wingbeats and saw him land right in front of us, blocking our path. We tried to ignore him, but he continued to follow us for another quarter mile before we finally lost him by walking through a thick stand of quaking aspen.

I'm sure no male blue grouse on that mountain would stand a chance against our mighty gladiator. In fact, a goshawk might think twice before attacking him. This is one of the most amazing experiences I have had during my 60 years in the outdoors.

J. D. Jones
Joliet

We welcome all your comments, questions, and letters to the editor. We'll edit letters as needed for accuracy, style, and length. Reach us at *Montana Outdoors*, P. O. Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701. Or e-mail us at tdickson@mt.gov.

Giving kids a jump start on hunting

This year's big game hunting season will be unlike anything Montana hunters have ever experienced. First of all, opening day of the general firearm season will be on a Saturday (October 23) rather than the usual Sunday, providing hunters a full opening weekend of hunting.

Even more significant is Montana's new youth-only early deer season. On the Thursday and Friday (October 21 and 22) before the regular general firearm season opener, legally licensed hunters age 12 to 15 may hunt deer statewide when accompanied in the field by an adult, who may not hunt deer those two days.

The FWP Commission adopted the youth hunt earlier this year to make it easier for young hunters to get their first deer. Hunting can be hard and frustrating. Studies show that young people are more likely to give up on hunting if they don't succeed early on. Having a few days just for themselves before the regular season increases young hunters' odds of harvesting a deer.

The new early hunt falls during the annual Montana Education Association meeting, when kids are out of school. We and other supporters hope parents use this opportunity to make the hunting opener a four-day family event. Because they can't hunt on Thursday and Friday, parents can concentrate on providing advice to their kids on safety, ethics, stalking, and shot placement. (Of course, adults can do that during the regular season, too, but it's a lot easier when they aren't hunting.) Then on Saturday and Sunday, Dad and Mom can go out after their own deer and elk.

Instilling a love of hunting in kids benefits everyone.

Many hunting parents have told us they are excited about this new opportunity. They point out how video games, electronic media, organized sports, and other activities compete for their children's attention. They appreciate that FWP supports hunting families by giving them this additional chance to show their kids the joys of the hunt.

Montana's tradition of providing young hunters and families with extra opportunities began in earnest in 2002 when the FWP Commission first allowed youth age 12 to 15 to hunt a cow elk in many hunting districts without having to draw an antlerless tag. Then Montana began offering special waterfowl and pheasant hunts before the regular season openers, giving young hunters first crack at the birds. In 2009, the Montana legislature approved the Come Home To Hunt license, which makes it easier for former Montanans living out of state to hunt here with family members. These and other special family-oriented opportunities are explained more fully in the FWP deer, elk, and antelope hunting regulations booklet and on-line at fwp.mt.gov.

Instilling a love of hunting in kids benefits everyone. Enthusiastic young hunters grow up to be dedicated adult hunters, who then become partners with FWP biologists and private landowners to help manage big game populations. Even more important, hunting is a way for kids to connect with the outdoors. By hunting—and wildlife watching, camping, fishing, and taking part in other outdoors activities—young Montanans spend time in the natural world, where they learn to value wildlife and wild places.

DENVERBRYAN.COM

FWP's support for youth hunting opportunities stems from our mission to provide stewardship for Montana's wildlife. That's a huge job in a state so rich in wildlife, one impossible for biologists and wildlife managers to do alone. But the job gets done, decade after decade, because so many individual Montanans dedicate themselves to helping this department conserve wildlife and its habitat.

One of the best ways the state can create future Montana conservationists is to foster and support the desire of young people to head out to the sage flats or mountain forests, with eyes wide open and a hopeful heart, gun firmly in hand.

—JOE MAURIER, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*

IN THE COMMISSION ROOM

Selected recent decisions by the FWP Commission:

- **Adapted the 2010 bison quotas** with an initial allocation of 44 either-sex licenses and potentially 100 additional cow/calf licenses (if winter weather pushes enough bison out of Yellowstone National Park).
- **Approved purchase of two conservation easements north of Hinsdale:** a 159-acre easement on the Cottonwood Bend property on the Milk River, and a 460-acre easement on Beaver Creek. Both to be purchased at 40 percent of the appraised fee value ($175,000–$195,000 and $400,000–$425,000 respectively.)
- **Approved FWP coordinating the translocation of up to 20 swift foxes** from north-central Montana to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation.
- **Endorsed developing a collaborative sage-grouse augmentation project with Alberta.**

Bozeman photographer **Dušan Smetana** says that of the thousands of photographs he takes each year, only a few stand out in his mind. This photo, taken in October while he was bird hunting with friends in the foothills of the Little Belt Mountains, is one.

"But it's not such a happy story," Smetana says. "I wish I could say I crawled on my belly half a mile to get this picture. But it's a bird I hit when shooting a double on grouse. I killed the first bird but only broke the wing of this one. So I have very mixed feelings when I look at this picture. I love the photo, with that beautiful rock and the grouse, which you never see quite like that. But I feel so much regret that I wounded the bird, that I took that second shot and didn't make a clean kill. Seeing it crouched there against the rock made me feel terrible. But I'm a photographer, so I had to get my camera out and get the photo anyway. Seeing it makes me both very happy and very sad at the same time." ■

GULF OIL SPILL REACHES MONTANA

Still clean, a cinnamon teal swims at Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Montana.

NEAL & MJ MISHLER

Though more than 1,500 miles away, the Deepwater Horizon offshore oil spill could harm some Montana birds. The greasy black goo can coat the feathers and kill the food sources of many types of ducks, shorebirds, and other species migrating from and through Montana to wintering waters along the Gulf of Mexico shore and farther south.

Steve Hoffman, executive director of Montana Audubon, says shorebirds wade shallow coastal waters eating crustaceans and invertebrates plucked from mud and sand. Oil from the BP well, which exploded April 20, has been washing up along some gulf wetlands and beaches for months. Among the Montana species Hoffman is concerned about are sandpipers, dowitchers, phalaropes, herons, egrets, and terns. "Many will be down along the gulf, trying to survive in that mess," he says.

Five million gallons of oil leaked from the well before it was finally capped in late July.

Bob Sanders, Conservation Program manager for Ducks Unlimited in Montana, says many teal and diving ducks winter along brackish coastal wetlands. "Oil is toxic to crustaceans, invertebrates, and submergent plants that ducks eat, so it's killing their food source," he says. "And oil gets on their feathers. They sink and drown."

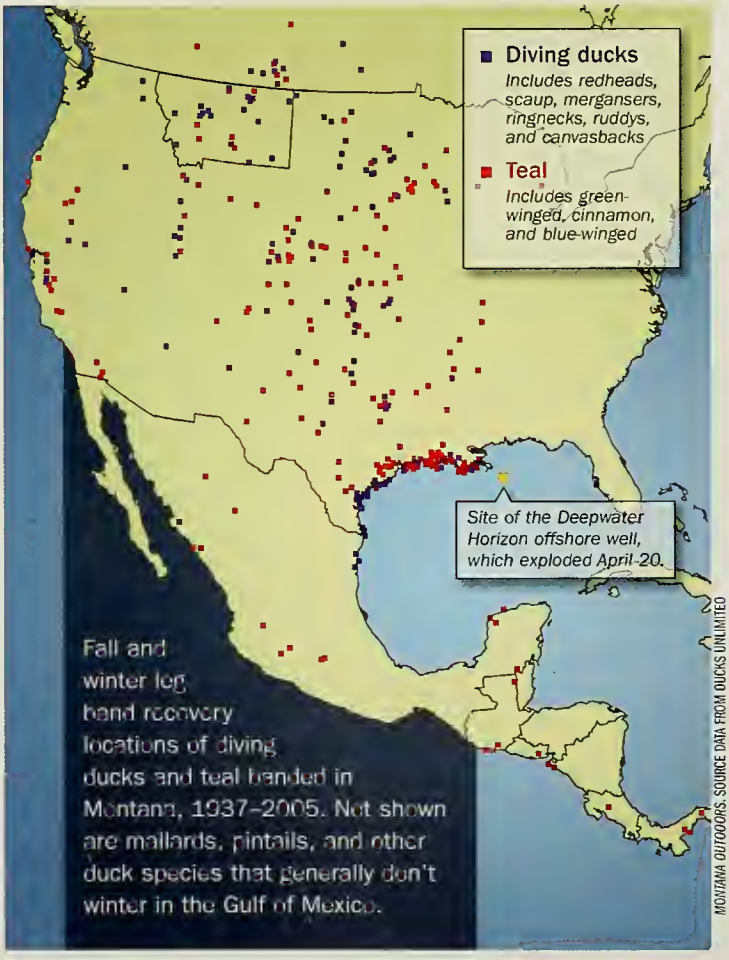
Catherine Wightman, avian biologist for FWP, says hydrocarbons in crude oil can damage bird reproduction, create mutations in offspring, and kill birds outright. "Compounds in oil can create health problems for many generations of birds," she says.

The oil spill highlights the interconnectedness of migrating birds and their various habitats throughout the Western Hemisphere, adds Wightman. "Maybe the only good thing to come out of this disaster is that more people are recognizing that what happens in faraway environments can affect birds they see in their home state," she says.

Fortunately, many Montana water birds don't use the gulf. Sanders says waterfowl migrating along the Pacific Flyway, which includes Montana's western half, overwinter mainly in California, the Great Salt Lake, and Mexico. "Mallards won't be affected because they winter primarily in Nebraska and along inland states bordering the Mississippi River," he says.

Also, most of the spilled oil has remained in waters east of New Orleans, while the majority of Montana's gulf-wintering birds stay along the Texas coast, west of the spill.

Sanders says people can't do much about what is being called the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history. But they can still help ducks, shorebirds, and other water birds by demanding stronger public conservation programs. One example he cites is the North American Wetland Conservation Act, up for congressional renewal this year. "We need to create and protect better quality habitat to hold birds off the coast, minimize them going out into the ocean, and make sure they are in the healthiest condition possible," Sanders says.



MONTANA OUTDOORS. SOURCE DATA FROM DUCKS UNLIMITED

Can you hear me (turning in a poacher) now?

Ourdoors purists may cringe when they hear someone's mobile phone ring in the backcountry. But those tiny communications devices are helping FWP game wardens catch poachers, says Brian Shinn, coordinator of Monrana's Turn in Poachers Program (TIP-MONT). According to Shinn, calls to the TIP-MONT hotline are up more than 50 percent over the past two years, from 1,300 in 2007 to 2,180 in 2009.

"Hunters program the hotline number into their cell phone, and when they see someone breaking the law, they make the call right as it happens," he says.

Shinn says that when people who witness a crime wait until they return home to call, "they tend to forget about it or shrug it off. But when they first see someone poaching or trespassing, they get pretty fired up. I've had a landowner call me and say, 'I saw a guy illegally kill a deer on my property, and I'm in my truck following his vehicle right now.'"

Shinn says people with cell phones are also able to provide more facts and details. "That's a big help for a game warden trying to build a case," he says.

One of the most common calls to the hotline is from hunters walking on U.S. Forest Service roads closed to motorized vehicles. "They say, 'Hey, I hiked 5 miles up this road and a guy in a four-wheeler just blew past me,'" Shinn says.

People can program the TIP-MONT hotline (1-800-847-6668) into their speed dial like any other number. "Press one button and you're right into a disparcher," Shinn says. "We can put you through to a warden or take the information directly."

Callers may remain anonymous. Cash awards are made for tips leading to convictions.

Shinn says TIP-MONT has begun looking into the feasibility of accepting text messages. "Texting is used by law enforcement in some other states. In Wisconsin, the Department of Natural Resources' poaching hotline has already started accepting text messages," he says.

Shinn adds that FWP public information campaigns over the past few years have helped make more people aware of Montana's growing poaching problem. "In the past you might have had people in a community look the other way when they saw someone poaching," he says. "But now they see themselves as the protectors of wildlife, doing their civic duty to report what they see. With cell phones, they've got the perfect tool to do that as fast as possible."

Cell phones are helping game wardens find and arrest poachers.

MONTANA FWP

New hunting license brings families together

For the past three hunting seasons, something was missing from Bob Gibson's elk camp: his adult son, Mike.

After graduating from Montana State University in 1980, Mike could not find work here and ended up in Utah. To hunt deer or elk in Montana without an outfitter, he had to apply for a general nonresident big game combination license, available only through an annual lottery. "It's luck of the draw, and Mike wasn't having any luck," says the elder Gibson, of Bozeman.

Mike Gibson's fortunes—and those of other former Montana hunters with family here—changed for the better recently when Montana instituted the new Come Home To Hunt license. Passed by the state legislature, the new law creates 1,000 additional licenses available to nonresidents who previously purchased resident Montana hunting licenses or passed the state's hunter education course before 2010. The hunters must be sponsored by a family member to obrain either a nonresident deer combinarion license or a big game (deer and elk) combination license.

Because the new licenses are in addition to existing nonresident licenses, they don't rake opportunities away from out-of-state hunters who didn't previously live here.

Montana typically makes available 17,000 nonresidenr big game combinarion licenses each year, 5,500 designated for outfitters' clients. The rest are awarded by lottery, where rhe odds are roughly two to one. Last year 19,000 nonresidents applied for the remaining 11,500 general big game combination licenses.

> "I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to hunting camp this year."

To purchase a Come Home To Hunt license, a nonresidenr must fill out an application and have it signed by a sponsoring adult family member who is a legal Montana resident and has a valid Montana hunting license. Applications and additional information are available on the FWP website ar fwp.mt.gov.

Gibson says his son recently called to say he received his Come Home To Hunt license. "I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to hunting camp this year," he says. "And rhis year we'll not only have my son back in camp but also a grandson joining us for the first time. Hunting camp will be joy, pure joy."

The Early Season

Crossing the Divide into bird hunting heaven.

By Rick Bass. Illustrations by Stan Fellows.

I love the sprawl and stretch of bird season in Monrana, which begins so early, still in the grip of summer's delicious—and dangerous—heat, and runs so late into the grip of equally dangerous winter weather, where the dogs you helped keep safe from heat stroke must now be protected from frostbite. Over the years, upland bird hunting has divided, in my mind, into an Early Season and a Late Season, defined essentially by a rough midpoint of November 1. I couldn't begin to say which I love most. Whichever one is coming up next, I suppose. For most of the waiting year, that's the early season.

Even though you have been counting down since, well, perhaps April, September always catches you with its onrush, its heated surprise. Summer's been great, but now it's time to go, whether you're quite ready or nor. And so with a strange mix of the old eagerness and yet reluctance, you break free of summer's embrace and head east, out of the smoking mountains, with the fires of summer still licking the ridge tops here and there, and you cross over the Divide and drop down into the flatlands, hoping to intercept the first few migrations of the season—the thinly clad stone-gray bullets of mourning doves, which race south well in advance of any hint of colder weather. And you hope also, in September, to reacquaint yourself with the ever-faithful native upland birds—the exquisitely patterned (and exquisitely delicious) sharp-tailed grouse, which are always waiting for you, as well as the immigrants of only a hundred years ago, the reddish mahogany and faster-flying Hungarian partridge.

The country is always parched, though usually, in those first days of September, the summer ends with a purple thunderstorm, boiling up one evening, violet anvil-shaped clouds filled with gold lightning bolts, so that the next day, rather than having limited water concentrating the doves, the doves have an infinitude of puddles from which to sip. They spread wide and far across the country; but no matter, they are still out there, and for a little while, the land is cooler. (A day or two later, the water will dry up again, and it will be as if the rain never came, as if summer will never end.)

You're not ready, in September, but sometimes you manage to hit the birds anyway—shooting instinctively in front of them, in your unreadiness, as if not yet fully focused on the fact that hunting season is really here again, that the first eight months of the year have fallen away now, and that from here on everything will be fuller, and, for many of us, more deeply and sharply felt, in every way.

Somehow, a few birds accrue. The doves, with their thin feathers, are easy to pluck, and in the heat you have to keep them in a cool place. You wait for them early and late in the day, and shortly after they have come and gone you take your out-of-shape dogs and out-of-shape self a short distance away from the shade into the bright yellow, drought-anguished, windy country, the alkaline gray dust rising from your boots. The dogs gulp water at every opportunity from the offering of your cupped hand, and again, you start to realize—slowly at first, but then in a hurry—that summer is fully behind you now, this year's summer gone forever, even though it may yet be the hottest week of the year. Beware the rattlesnakes.

And when a flock of September sharptails launches in front of you, with their distinctive laugh going away, and you fire and tumble one or sometimes two—the snowy-chested birds seeming even larger than ever, after the small sky-piercing torpedoes of the doves—summer is fully gone.

In its own way, the heat helps you in this adjustment. By late morning it is already too hot to hunt, and you retire to the clattering shade of cottonwoods, many of which still possess deep green leaves, but some of which already show yellowing or even browning leaves. You nap there with your dogs panting locomotive-breathed beside you, plopped down belly-cooled and early-season tender-footed in that shade, and with the shining brilliance beyond.

Your mind is still sluggish, as slow as the doves are fast. And some of the covey-birds that get up, the Huns and sharpies, are still too young to shoot, a little too unformed. It's best to ease into it. Lying in the shade reading, I encounter a passage in a short story by Eudora Welty, in which she compares the color of a faded pink rose to that of the tongue of a panting bird dog.

October, the second half of the first half. The case can be made that this is the best month, in that almost everything comes into season now—pheasants, waterfowl, even a little antelope on the side, as well as deer and elk—a lovely distraction, a crescendo of wild meat approaching later in the month. And furthering the case for October-as-peak is the incredible foliage, particularly along the river bottoms, where the birds are often to be found: crimson chokecherry, yellow cottonwood, clear blue skies, with snow dusting the distant mountains now, good hard frosts each morning, and the geese heading south, calling each night.

It is not uncommon, in October, with an antelope iced down in the big ice chest in the back—in those years when I have been fortunate enough to find one—for me to stop

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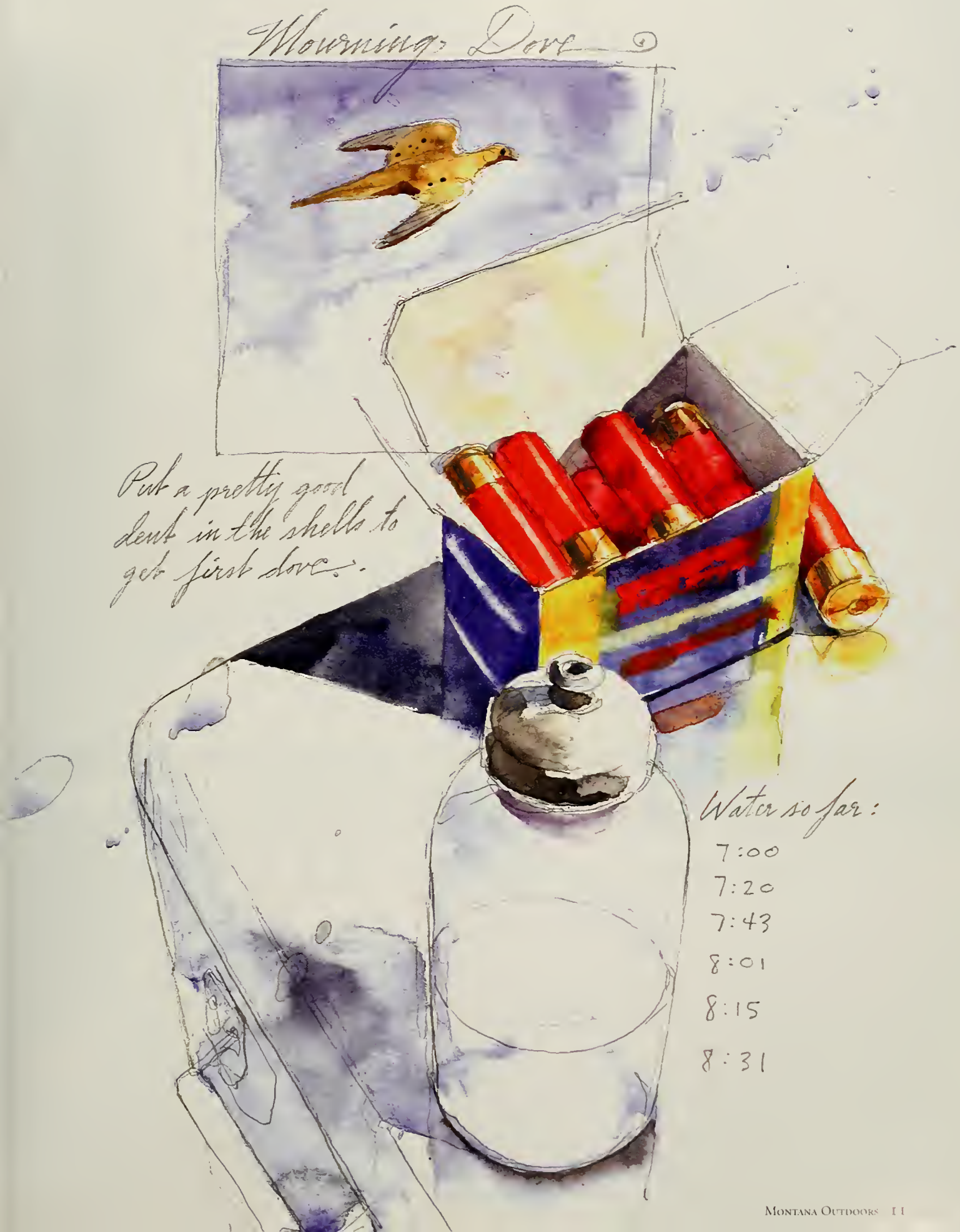
Rick Bass is a novelist and nonfiction writer in Troy.
A longer version of this essay first appeared in The Wide Open: Prose, Poetry, and Photographs of the Prairie *(University of Nebraska Press, 2008). Used with permission.*
Stan Fellows of Iowa City, Iowa, has illustrated for publications including Smithsonian Magazine, National Geographic, *and* The New York Times.


Mourning Dove
Put a pretty good dent in the shells to get first dove.
Water so far:
7:00
7:20
7:43
8:01
8:15
8:31

in the ever-more-yellow prairie and with the colder, more northerly wind in my face, to park not far from one of the windscreens of thirsty cottonwoods that signifies the presence of an autumn-shallow riffling river and creep toward it, shotgun broken open for safety and loaded with steel shot, dog-on-a-leash (they are, after all, naughty big pointers, better at running powerfully ahead than anything else), and creep into that hedge of whippy cottonwoods—my heart pounding surely beyond its middle-aged limits as I hear a nervous gabbling of the ducks cloistered just on the other side of that screen, so close now that perhaps I could catch one with a lasso, were there room to throw. The dog is panting, coughing, frantic at being so restrained, and at hearing the birds—hopefully, they cannot hear him over the sound of the riffles—and then we step—burst, really—through the last of that screened cover, announcing ourselves. The raft of ducks converts instantly into a tower of ducks, and then a tornado of ducks, ascending; and yet look, a small miracle, one of them is falling from the tornado, pale belly bright and downward-moving against the all-else rise of flashing emerald, earth-color, violet, and black duck-color; and then, from higher up and farther out, another one falls, hitting the water with a splash, and I unsnap the dog and he hits the river like an arrow fired by an archer.

But duck-water is rare in this country—rarer each year, in the continuing and historic drought—and the October days are more often spent following the upland birds. It's the month when pheasant season opens—the showcase-species for my pointers, the rooster pheasants being the only creature in the world, perhaps save for maybe a cheetah, that can flat outrun these dogs; and here in their seventh year of existence, my hard-headed dogs are finally just about ready to make their peace with this fact, and are learning when to run full throttle and when to skulk and sneak and pussyfoot along. It almost doesn't seem fair: Each year there's a new crop of birds—brilliant with the instinct of their long existence in the world but newcomers nonetheless—while the dogs now have seven seasons under their belts, as well as their own blue-chip databank of instinct, and by now have seen, on these same familiar fields, pretty much everything the pheasants can and cannot, and will and will not, do.

As the new snow on the tops of the distant mountains—the Beartooths, the Crazies, the Big Belts, Little Belts, Absarokas, and even the Rockies themselves—summons the blood to a wondering and joyful heart's leap, so too does that amazing moment when, after your dog has tricked the pheasant into giving up the running game and hunkering down to hide, and when, heart-thrashing, you and the dog both stand over that hidden and completely unseen bird, and yet knowing, godlike, of his certain presence, and precise location—the bird's heart thrashing as hard as your own, and with the tension so electric that anything, anything at all, will spring the bird into the sky now, and you stand there, thinking, How can my old heart take any more of this? How?

You take a deep breath. Sometimes you look away for a second, back toward those snowy mountains, and the blue sky, and the rattle of the yellow leaves, trying to remember it, trying to absorb and inhale and consume it, trying to embed it so deeply that it will be with you even after you are gone, and you, in it; and then you look back down to the moment at hand—the dog still quivering, like an arrow that has just been fired into a stump—and almost gingerly, you nudge the tuft of grass with the tip of your toe, and the giant bird appears from the grass like a dream created.

The bird's coal-red eyes fix on yours in the fiercest of glares as he rises, wings flapping furiously, copper-and-black banner of tail unfurling beneath him, the priestly white collar so clearly visible, and the violet-and-crimson-and-emerald head, with the bird peeling away from you now, and further confusing and discombobulating you, the rooster is crowing and cackling, daring you, challenging you and your fading old heart. But you remember to shoot in front of the bird, aiming not at the spectacle, the incredible pageant of color that is the bird, but instead a short ways into the future; and when the wings stop flapping suddenly, and the flight is no more, and the bird is falling, you praise your dog, congratulating his or her excellence, and command the retrieve.

All birds are beautiful, coming back to you in your dog's mouth, but there is no dog-gift, no present quite as beautiful as that of a pheasant, with the bright iridescent head and the long elegant sweep of tail feathers, and the joy and pride and confidence in the dog's eyes, as well as some other unnamable thing, some ancient thing. And again, out here in this open country, you are a part of it, in October.

A thirty-five-dollar-a-night hotel room, a flickering ball game on the television, and falling asleep well before nine, both dogs warming the foot of the bed, snoring quietly. The next day carries you farther into the interior, and into the paradoxical knife edge of greater contentment, and greater loneliness, deeper into the hunting season.

The dogs and I pass an abandoned school, Depression-era. What kind of adults did these children grow into, I wonder, staring around at the now completely uninhabited landscape. The chain halyard on a flagpole 70 years flagless still bangs in the wind—as if the children have only gone out to recess—and I remember with sudden clarity and surprise a childhood friend who died young, whom I have not thought of in perhaps a quarter-century. Ghosts,

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another of October's prairie migrants.

Later in the day, the dogs and I walk up on two golden eagles sitting in the branches of a cottonwood. The eagles lunge forward into flight, breaking the rotting limbs when they lift off, and in the heat and wind I am dazzled, confused—two birds rising, and two great limbs crashing to the ground. I feel invisible, and though it is again a lonely feeling, it is one that is, I think, good for the soul, and particularly accessible, out here.

Nearer to dusk, I stop near a bench of public land I wish to hunt, a place I've never hunted before—the ground before me appears overgrazed and the creek banks eroded by cattle hooves, but with a nice chokecherry thicket on the hillside—though first I want to listen to one of the baseball playoff games. The Astros, the team of my childhood, have squeaked into the playoffs and are improbably leading the mighty Cardinals. The old man, Roger Clemens, is on the mound, injured and ancient, with a full count against a young slugger. He tries to rocket a fastball past him one more time, as he has done so many tens of thousands of times before; but this time, this one time, it doesn't quite work out, and the Cards advance to the World Series, and to their appointment with destiny and the Boston Red Sox.

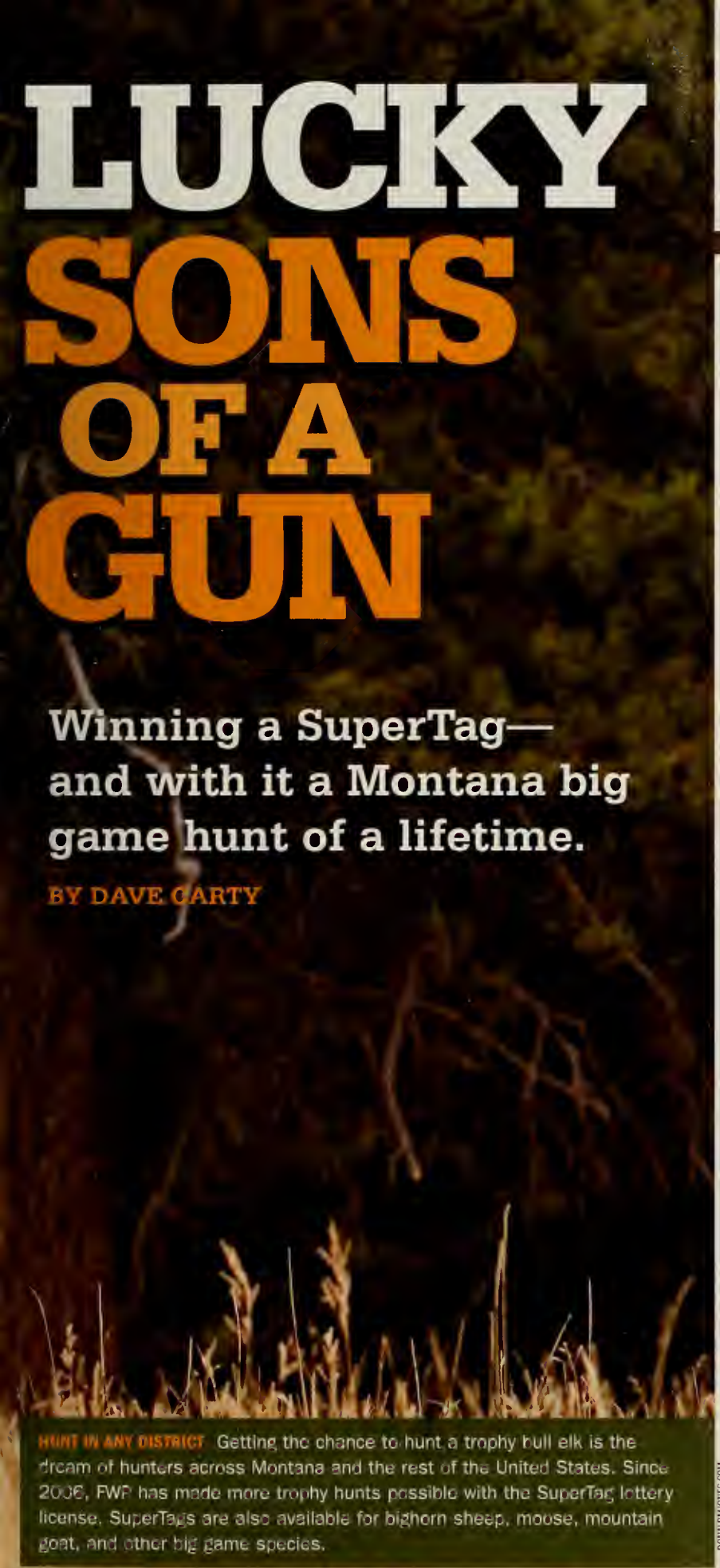
Years ago, I would never have sat there in the car, so near to day's end, with hunting still to be done, and listened so comfortably to something as fleeting and irrelevant as a baseball game. I would have been out charging the hills, pounding the hills, hunting hard all the way through the day's end.

But now the ballgame is over, and I still have twenty or so minutes. I take little speckled Point out toward those chokecherries, where he finds for me a single sharptail, which I hit with a long second shot. He retrieves it, and as we walk back toward the truck, a long skein of tundra swans passes overhead, flying low and slow, descending to open water. He lifts his head, starts to run after them, then just stops and watches, until they are too small, too far away to see, disappearing into the dusk and the velvet folds of the foothills, as if into a cave for the night.

LUCKY SONS OF A GUN

Winning a SuperTag—and with it a Montana big game hunt of a lifetime.

BY DAVE CARTY



HUNT IN ANY DISTRICT Getting the chance to hunt a trophy bull elk is the dream of hunters across Montana and the rest of the United States. Since 2006, FWP has made more trophy hunts possible with the SuperTag lottery license. SuperTags are also available for bighorn sheep, moose, mountain goat, and other big game species.

DONALD M. JONES.COM

When John Laughery of Moses Lake, Washington, learned he'd won a Montana elk hunting SuperTag, he let out a whoop so loud his secretary ran into his office.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I just won the lottery!"

Laughery laughs at the recollection. "She thought I was talking about Mega Millions. 'But no,' I told her, 'It's better than that. I just got a SuperTag!'"

The SuperTag, a special hunting license awarded by lottery, allows winners to hunt in any Montana hunting district, including the famous limited-entry trophy areas. Laughery says that winning the coveted hunting license gave him a new lease on life. "I got hold of a trainer and started working out three days a week," he says. "I ended up losing about 20 pounds, and I took 36 days off work, which I hadn't done in ten years." Then the really hard work started.

"I did a lot of on-line research and talked to friends," Laughery says. His brother, a Montana fishing and hunting guide in the Fort Smith area, also helped, asking around for where his lucky brother should hunt. The first place the Washington hunter hit was the Elkhorn Mountains, south of Helena, during the tail end of archery season.

"I saw a lot of elk in there but didn't get one," he says. "But basically that was just the first part of my trip. Then it snowed, so I hung out for a few more days, then drove to Billings, hopped on a plane, and flew back to Moses Lake for an audit."

An audit?

"Yes, I had an audit with the lovely people from the IRS," Laughery explains. "The guy said, 'You seem kind of antsy.' And I said, 'I'm not antsy about my tax return, I just want to get the hell out of here.' When I told him why, he kind of grinned and said, 'Well, let's just cut this short.' Seems like when you get a tag like this, all of a sudden other hunters want to help you out."

A few days later, Laughery was back in Montana, this time in the southeastern corner. "I was on a ranch down there for about ten days and saw some really nice bulls. But we didn't see the one I really

"I nicknamed him 'Angry Moose' because of the whole showdown that led to me shooting him," says Glen Majors (left). "He's not the big bruiser I was after, but the whole experience makes him a trophy in my book." John Laughery (right) was excused early from an IRS audit to hunt this bull elk near Big Sandy.

wanted until late one night and I could never find it again.

"In the meantime, I'd been talking to a rancher who lives up by Big Sandy. I find out his cousin lived in Moses Lake, where I'm from. And it turns out the cousin was my seventh-grade English teacher."

Score one for connections. Laughery received an invitation. "So I spent 11 or 12 days up there," Laughery says, "and on November 19, I ended up shooting a nice six-point bull."

A CHANCE FOR ORDINARY FOLKS

Montana began offering SuperTags in 2006 as an answer to public criticism that Fish, Wildlife & Parks' big game auctions, conducted to raise management funds for bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and other coveted species, were available only to the wealthy. Some bighorn sheep licenses have gone for more than a quarter-million dollars. "Montana decided to give folks who didn't have that kind of money an opportunity to win the same type of license," says Ron Aasheim, head of the department's Communications and Education Bureau.

Every year, Montana awards one SuperTag each for moose, bighorn sheep, elk, deer, mountain goat, mountain lion, pronghorn antelope, and bison. Both residents and nonresidents may buy unlimited numbers of the lottery chances at $5 each. FWP considers the drawings a huge success. The more than $300,000 generated from SuperTag lottery sales each year pays to enhance public hunting access and boost game law enforcement.

Most applicants buy just one or two chances, says Aasheim, but some improve their odds with multiple purchases. One year a single hunter bought 400 sheep SuperTag chances. Another bought a combined total of 800 chances for moose, sheep, and mountain goat. Of course, the fact that a person can buy more than one chance favors those with higher incomes, but Aasheim notes that most SuperTags have been won by hunters who purchased just one or a few chances. "Luck is still the biggest element," he says.

What are the odds of winning? Aasheim says roughly 21,000 chances are purchased for bighorn sheep and 15,000 for elk. The odds are far better for pronghorn, averaging 2,000 chances sold each year, and mountain lion, with 1,500 chances sold.

OH WHAT A FEELING

Each year several lucky hunters win a SuperTag license for any hunting district in Montana, including the famous trophy areas. Find out more at FWP offices, license providers, and on-line at fwp.mt.gov.

LOTS OF LEG WORK

Winning a SuperTag is certainly a thrill, but it's no guarantee of success. It's not even a guarantee the winner will find a place to hunt. Like any hunter, a SuperTag license holder needs permission to access private land and will find trophies on public land only with plenty of scouting and leg work. Locating a district with heavy-racked moose, bighorn sheep, or elk isn't the same thing as actually finding a trophy within that district. Which is why Glen Majors of Manhattan ended up putting 3,000 miles on his truck a few years ago.

"It was almost total disbelief and shock," says Majors of hearing the news he'd been drawn for a moose SuperTag. "It threw off all my plans. I had wanted to do a bunch of elk hunting, but all I ended up doing that fall was hunt moose."

By the end of the season, Majors had driven the equivalent of a coast-to-coast trip to check out Montana moose hunting areas, walked dozens of miles on scouting trips, and talked to everyone he thought might know something about moose. In the end, he focused on the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. That's where he learned that when you call in a moose, you might get more than you bargained for.

"I'd found a nice bull, and was trying to get in on him, but I just could never get an opportunity," Majors recalls. "I was walking through 6-foot-high willows, and I knew that other moose were in the area. All of a sudden I had a cow and calf up in front of me, and a small bull to my left, and then another bull."

It turns out the other four moose also had been attracted to Majors's calls. "That cow started closing the distance on me. There were no trees in sight, just willows. Then one of the other bulls starts staring at me, and the next thing I know he's rolling his head and walking toward me. I was kind of in disbelief this was happening to me.

"Of course, growing up in Montana, I know

Dave Carty is a freelance writer in Bozeman.

Left: Larry Martin, coming off 35 days of radiation treatment for throat cancer, with the moose he killed 98 feet from the road. Right: Ian Weaver with his mountain goat. "We hiked up over Fairy Lake and damn, there they were, just as planned." He was back in Bozeman with the trophy before dark.

that moose are sometimes more dangerous than bears. So I'm talking to the bull, but it did no good, and he kept taking steps toward me. He got closer and closer, and by this time I'm waving my rifle in the air and picking up my voice and trying to spook them away. I had no exit. I was surrounded by moose."

For a few tense moments, says Majors, it looked like the moose might have drawn a bead on him. That's when he decided his hunt had gone on long enough.

"When that closest bull turned his head to look at the cow, I shot him in the neck and dropped him right there," says Majors.

BEATING THE ODDS—AGAIN

Most SuperTag hunts aren't so dramatic. But some are even more so.

When Larry J. Martin of Clinton won a moose SuperTag last year, his life was unraveling. "I had mixed emotions," he says of getting the call from Aasheim that he'd won. "That same week I'd found out I had throat cancer. And one of my dearest friends had died of cancer 30 days before I found out I had mine. So I was preparing to die. I wasn't really preparing to think about moose hunting. As thrilled as I was, and as much of an upper it was to hear I'd won, it didn't offset the downer of finding out you have a disease that, when you go on the Internet, statistics say that only 16 percent of guys age 65 to 70 are going to live through." Martin, a novelist, was 68.

He'd had cancer once before, beat it, and decided to fight the disease with everything he had. He went to Houston, Texas, for 35 days of radiation treatment. By this time, the moose rut was over, making it harder for Martin to find a bull when he returned. But, weak as he was from the cancer therapy, the hunter still wanted to fill his SuperTag. He says he knew his moose was still out there somewhere, waiting for him.

"I got on the phone and talked to every outfitter around," says Martin. "Then I called a friend of a friend who had found moose for a couple of other guys." Unfortunately, Martin was still weak and could not hunt far from his vehicle. "But we went out anyway and, sure as hell, we stumbled onto a 45-inch moose that I killed 98 feet from a logging road. I know it was 98 feet because I then called my son, who had 100 feet of line on his winch. We had just enough to wrap the horns and get the bull to the road. My son—he's a young buck in his late 40s—then shimmied up a tree and chained a block up there. We ran the line through it, pulled my truck under it, and dropped the moose in the bed."

100 RAMS LATER

Steve Carson, who lived in Helena when he won his bighorn sheep SuperTag, says he spent months scouting seven hunting districts and glassed roughly 100 rams before killing this one north of Anaconda.

Martin says he would have liked a larger bull but was happy enough with the one he shot: "I was afraid not to take him. I was afraid I was going to run out of time."

It turns out he had more time than he thought. Martin recently reported that his cancer is in remission.

BACK BEFORE DARK

Many SuperTag winners try to stretch out their hunt for as long as possible, relishing the chance to be outdoors while searching for a trophy. For instance, Ryan Stratman of Bozeman says the 20-plus days he spent scouting the high country around Bozeman for mountain goats with two friends was as fun as the hunt itself. Then there are the hunts that are over almost before they begin.

After the usual research on the phone and Internet, mountain goat SuperTag winner Ian Weaver of Fredericksburg, Ohio, decided to hunt around Fairy Lake in the Bridger Range. The hunt began inauspiciously when an early season storm rolled into the area. Weaver and his hunting partner first tried to wait out the bad weather, but after a few days they decided to bundle up and look for mountain goats anyway. "We hiked up over Fairy Lake and there they were, just as planned," Weaver says. Less than an hour after spotting a big billy, Weaver killed the trophy. He and his partner were back in Bozeman with the mountain goat before dark.

Even if the endeavor is relatively easy or the animal's rack is smaller than they'd hoped, most SuperTag winners emerge from their hunts with trophy-sized memories. "If I never shoot another moose again, that guy is still a trophy to me," Majors says of the undersized bull that almost ran him down. "That whole situation—I'll never forget the craziness of it."

And yes, he's hoping against all odds that he'll win another moose SuperTag. "I'm buying chances every year," he says.

Family Reunion *photo essay*

Thomas Baumeister grew up in central Germany in a small town near Frankfurt. From an early age he accompanied his father on weekend hunts in the woods, and today he still returns to Germany or invites his dad to Montana in the fall so they can hunt together. "The bond we have with each other and with hunting is so genuine, so important," says Baumeister, FWP's Education Program manager.

Several years ago when he and I went pronghorn hunting near Harlowton, Baumeister brought along his four-year-old son Xander. He pulled the blond boy around in a game cart as we searched for bucks. When Baumeister shot his pronghorn, he asked me to take a photograph while he knelt proudly next to the animal with his son. I noticed he had tears in his eyes and asked why. "I'm not sure, but having Xander here and having these two parts of my life that I love so much come together is very powerful," he replied.

Bob Gibson of Bozeman would understand. The 77-year-old former U.S. Forest Service supervisor loves to hunt, especially with his son Mike. "You can't beat having something in common with another member of your family, something you both care about so deeply," says Gibson.

Other hunters I know feel the same way. One friend can't wait for the day his daughter joins him on a bowhunt. Another continued to invite his dad to deer camp even when the old fellow could no longer hunt, so he could enjoy the hunting camaraderie. Then there's Baumeister, who is counting the days to when his now ten-year-old son earns his hunter education certificate and can buy a deer license to hunt with his dad—and maybe Grandpa, too.

On the following pages are images of Montana hunting families who represent the tradition and heritage of kin coming together at harvest season to take part in an age-old ritual. It's a time when older generations pass wisdom, knowledge, and experience down to younger ones, who in turn rejuvenate their elders with eagerness, hope, and delight.

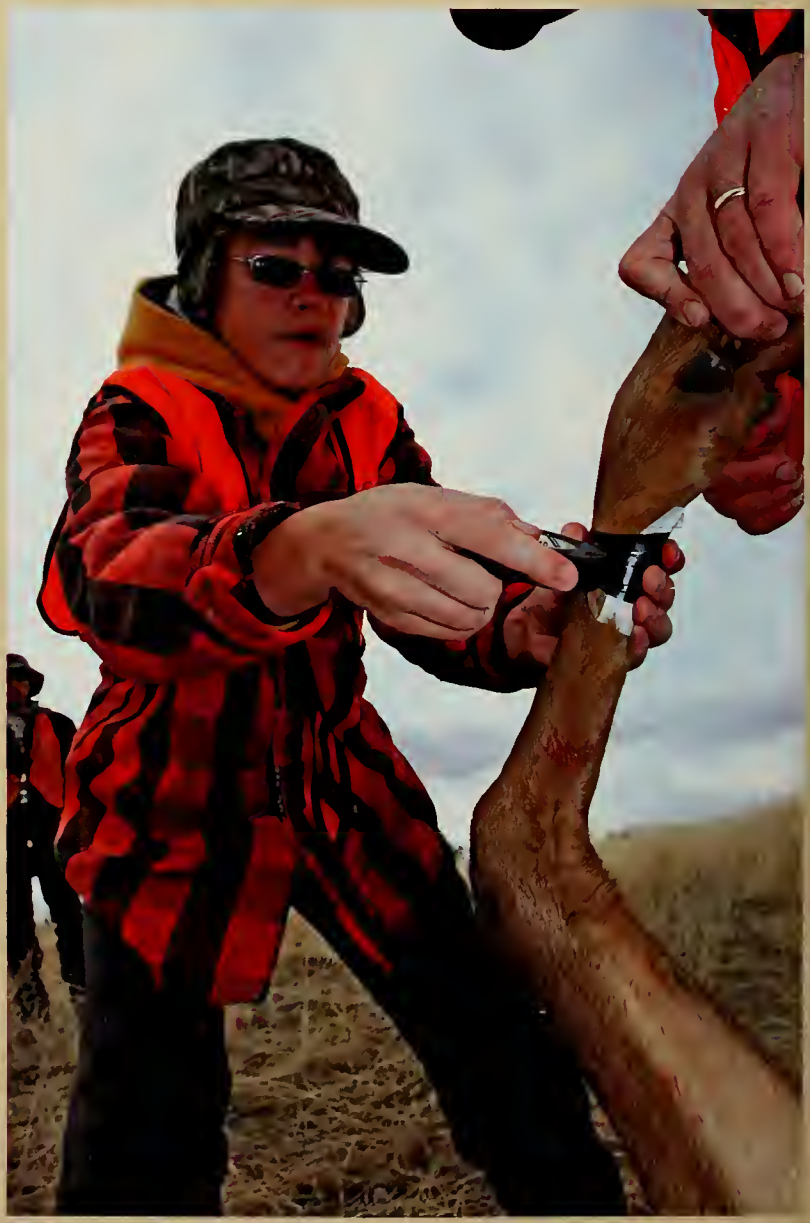
"The memory I have of tagging along as a boy with my dad on those first hunts is something I'll always have, something I'll never forget," says Baumeister. "And it's something I know will always have a special meaning for Xander when he grows up."

—Tom Dickson

Bill Buckley

Montana Outdoors

Clockwise from top left:
Dušan Smetana
Bill Buckley
Donald M. Jones
Denver Bryan
Paul Queneau

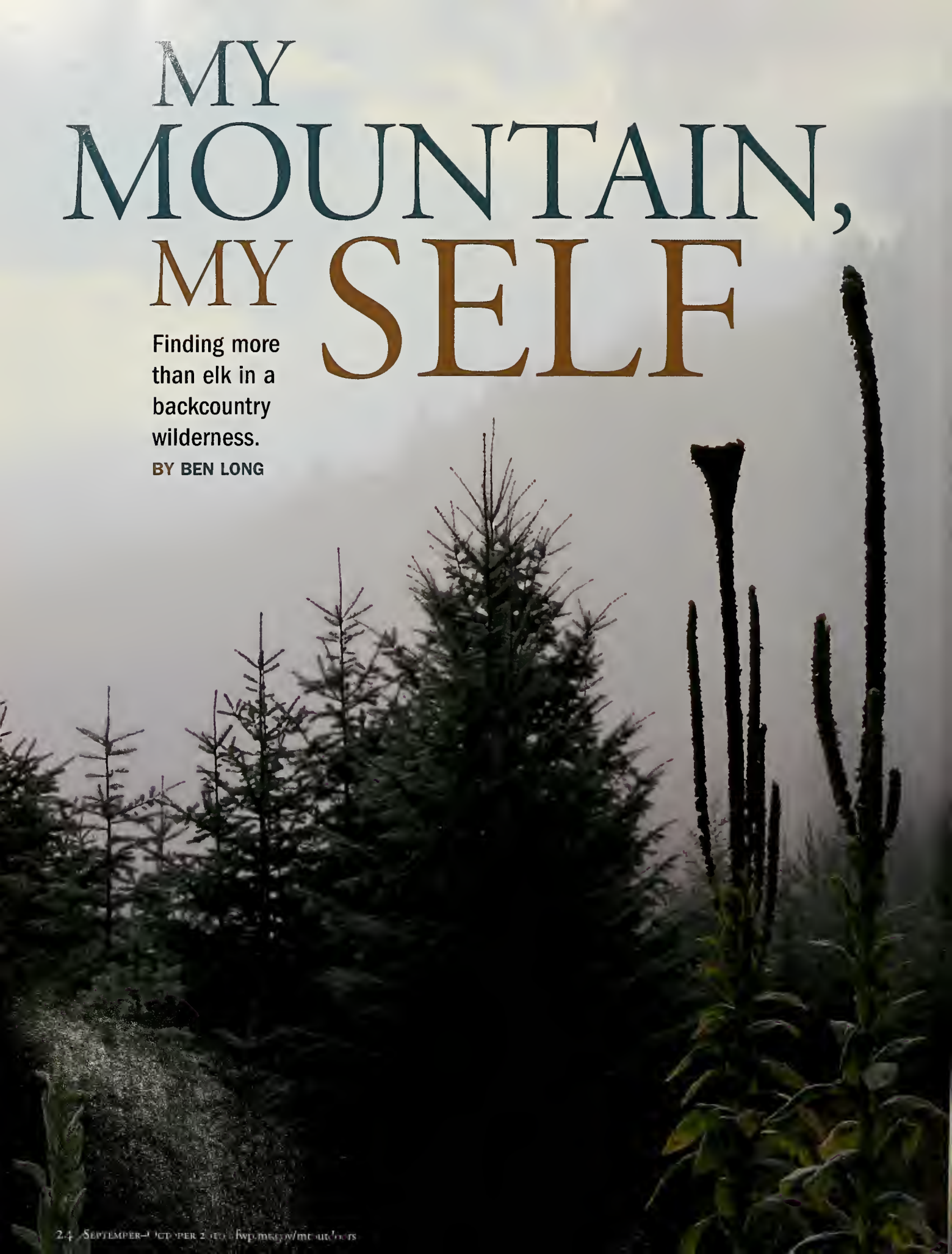


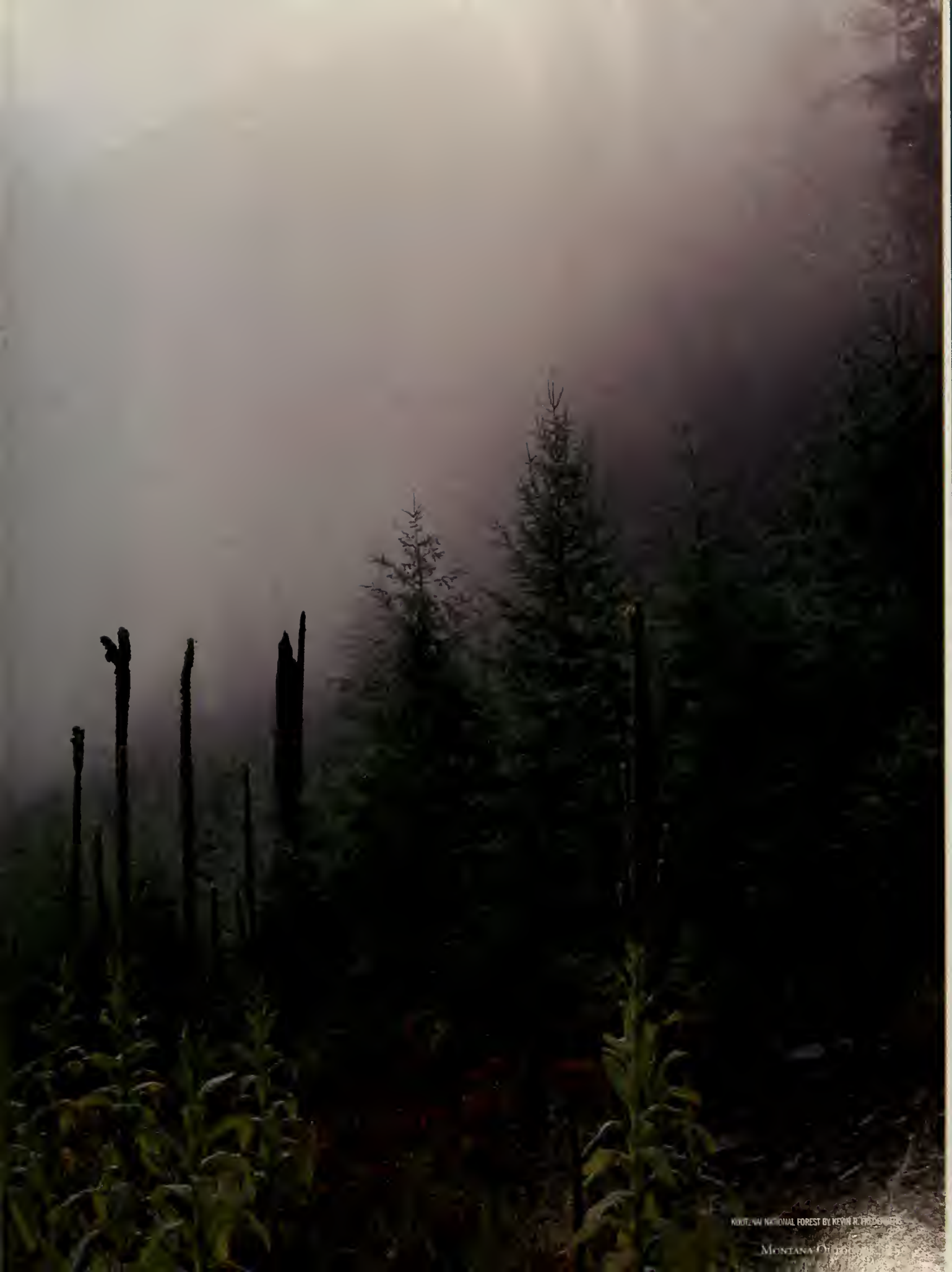
Clockwise from top left:
Tim Christie
Kenton Rowe
Victor Schendel
Kenton Rowe
Victor Schendel

MY MOUNTAIN, MY SELF

Finding more than elk in a backcountry wilderness.

BY BEN LONG





KOOTENAI NATIONAL FOREST BY KEVIN R. [illegible]

MONTANA [illegible]

If you are what you eat, part of me is the Kootenai National Forest.

In particular, some of my atoms and isotopes come from a single mountain on this two-million-acre national forest in northwestern Montana. It's a place the U.S. Forest Service designates a "roadless area."

Kootenai elk are not frequently featured in "hot spot" hunting magazine articles. The Kootenai forest is thick, steep, and cold. You can hunt entire seasons without laying eyes on an elk. Yet somehow, this mountain holds my imagination in its grip.

Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset could have been describing a hunt in these rugged mountains when he wrote that "the beauty of the hunt lies in the fact that it is problematic." Hunting here poses problems and beauty in equal shares—sometimes all I can stand of both.

Predawn on opening day I was leading my 15-year-old friend Jeremiah through the woods by headlamp. With young knees and contagious enthusiasm, he's a fine hunting partner. More practically, while I was limited in this hunting district to a brow-tined bull, as a youth hunter he was allowed to shoot either a cow or a bull. That upped our odds substantially.

I discovered this mountain the same year Jeremiah was born. I was drawn to the fact that it's a lone, undeveloped drainage in a sea of what the Forest Service euphemistically calls "intensively managed" forest. Getting away from roads and clearcuts is what I love about elk hunting. The mountain is steep enough to keep out all but the most dedicated.

Sun-up here looks like the dawn of time. That first summer I explored this mountain, my girlfriend and I hiked to an open ridge and spread our sleeping bags under August meteor showers. In the morning, we picked huckleberries for our breakfast pancakes. A few years later we got married.

The mountain has provided us since with meat every winter and enough antlers to clutter my office and garage: a 27-inch mule deer buck lured to a cow elk call; a 20-inch whitetail that walked past a trailhead where I stood waiting for more daylight to begin hiking; my two biggest bull elk, as well as others more suited for the freezer. Not to mention grouse, trout, and more huckleberries.

Moreover, this mountain feeds my soul. Some hunters cast a wide net, wearing out pickup tires and applying for far-flung permits. I keep returning to this mountain 60 miles from my front door. By learning what makes an elk herd tick, you begin to learn what makes a mountain tick. And what makes you tick.

Fifteen years is a sizable chunk of a person's life. I started hunting this mountain as a bachelor in my late 20s and now am in my early 40s. My pack full of responsibilities has grown heavier as the mountain has grown steeper. Boys I hunted with here years ago are now men with children of their own, and other men I've shared this mountain with are now gone forever.

I feel I am finally learning this mountain's secrets—like my investments are only now paying dividends. I have a fair sense of where game animals water and feed, how they run under pressure, and where they retreat until that pressure passes. I know the mountain is vast enough to hide the mature bulls and big enough that I can still get lost in its cliffs, crannies, and blizzards. Some days I feel like the mountain might kill me, and on others it has made me feel my most alive.

Every year the mountain asks me: Are you tough enough to hunt here? Every year I answer: So far.

The Great Burn of 1910 scoured the mountain. Giant snags stand like the masts of sailing ships over a sea of second-growth lodgepole pine and western larch. The slopes are scabbed with brush fields and bunchgrass pastures, opened up by that historic fire and renewed by smaller ones since.

Some of my best hunts here I never fired a shot. One day with perfect tracking snow, I followed the fresh trails of seven big game species: elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, moose, black bear, mountain lion, and wolf. And above me I could see the crags where bighorn sheep, mountain goats, and grizzlies live. The only human tracks I saw that day were from my hunting partner. It's a very healthy place—in large part because people must arrive on their own power, and the wildlife is spared the disturbance that comes with motor traffic.

The mountain is mapped with names of my own making: Crookedhorn Saddle, where a friend shot a bull with an ingrown antler; the North Fortress and the East Fortress, dark timber where elk hide when pressure heats up; the Savannah, a gentle slope of bunchgrass and giant Douglas fir where elk loaf on sunny winter afternoons.

Jeremiah and I have our own stories. He shot his first cow elk here exactly one year ago, and his older brother, Colin, took his first whitetail buck on this mountain a few years before that. I was eager for another day for the memory books.

As Jeremiah and I walked through the inky dark forest, we were startled to see ten sets of eyes reflecting the glow of my headlamp light. My first thought was that we'd stumbled into

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Ben Long is a writer in Kalispell. This essay was originally published in the January-February 2009 issue of Bugle, *the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's journal of elk country and the hunt. Used with permission.*

the local wolf pack. Then what turned out to be several whitetail does and fawns snorted and were gone.

We climbed through the morning. Mid-slope, we surprised something big nearby in dark timber. It made a crash so loud we both jumped in our boots. Then we caught a glimpse of the noisy beasts: two moose.

Jeremiah and I found the top third of the mountain under an inch of fresh snow. Good for tracking and stalking, but wet and likely to melt soon.

We ate lunch under the lookout and reconnoitered with Jeremiah's brother and dad. They bore long faces and sad tales. They had found elk at dawn just as planned, a bugling bull and a dozen cows. Colin fired two shots but missed clean.

I suspected the herd might go to a saddle at the foot of the Savannah, a notch that leads to the North Fortress. Jeremiah and I set off to see if we could find them.

Sure enough, tracks told us the elk had passed through the saddle at a walk. They would go into the North Fortress and bed down for the day.

Jeremiah and I followed, slow and quiet in the snow. He led the way, holding his grandfather's .300 Savage 99 at quarter arms.

We followed the trail into the afternoon. It was tough going to start with and got worse. From what I could tell, the elk could have been 100 yards deeper in the timber or all the way to Canada. After an hour in the deadfall jungle, we reached our personal point of diminishing returns. The odds of sneaking up on anything were slim. It was hard enough just to stand upright.

We returned to the saddle and crossed the pack trail that led back to the truck.

"We have a choice," I told Jeremiah. "We can take this trail, which is pretty easy, or we can bushwhack down the face of the mountain to Telegraph Ridge, which is pretty hard. It's steep and dense. It's going to be slick with this wet snow."

"Where do we stand to find more elk?" Jeremiah asked.

"Down the face."

"Then let's go down the face."

Good lad, I thought.

We delved back into the timber. Bull sign was thick, with one rubbed tree after another. But the trees could have been shredded a month ago.

After another quarter mile, we made game, this time a herd of young mule deer bucks. They were legal, but we were a long way from the truck, and it was only opening day. We'd have other chances at deer.

"They're bucks, but not worth shooting way back here," I whispered to Jeremiah. "Why don't you sneak up on one and put your crosshairs on it. Count coup, but don't shoot. Leave your safety on."

We stalked on. I showed him how to lean the rifle against a tree trunk for support. He took aim, exhaled, and whispered "bang."

By moving slowly, we crept past one deer after another without spooking them.

"That's a pretty good one," Jeremiah said of the fourth buck, hoping I would give him the okay.

"Sorry," I said. "We're hunting elk."

We kept going. A few more yards and I saw another bull rub. I pointed it out.

"Look," Jeremiah hissed. "There's another buck standing behind the rub."

Jeremiah crept toward the buck and squinted through his scope. For some reason, I glanced over my off shoulder and, to my shock, saw an elk standing broadside, about 30 yards downslope. Bull!

I would like to say that I gallantly offered the shot to Jeremiah. But there was no time. In an instant I found the bull's shoulder in the crosshairs of the scope of my .308 and pulled the trigger.

Jeremiah was stunned at the gunshot. He rushed over to me. "What was that?"

As if to answer, we heard the crash of a large animal hitting the ground.

"I just shot a bull elk," I said. Our elk hunt had gone from zero to a bull down in all of five seconds. Hunting dark timber is like that.

We knelt down and I let my case of the shakes run its course. Then Jeremiah stood at the spot where I'd taken my shot as I eased my way downhill to where the bull had stood. There was no tracking necessary. The five-point was crammed under a downed log. He fell so hard he broke a brow tine.

"Come on down," I said. "We've got a lot of work to do."

As I knelt down by the bull, before the drudgery of butchering and packing began, I briefly savored the moment. We would have prime meat for the winter and another adventure story to share for years to come. I gave silent thanks for my luck, my friends, and most of all, this mountain.

The author atop Barren Peak, Kootenai National Forest

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The word is out: Most of Montana's 334 fishing access sites are open to public hunting.

BY BOB GIBSON

N THE THICK OF IT Pheasants and white-ailed deer burrow into the densest cover ney can find, often along river bottoms. ishing access sites throughout Montana, specially those on large rivers such as he Yellowstone, are rich in riparian habitat. hough many hunters don't know it, most f these public sites are open to hunting.

BOB GIBSON/FWP

The purple-and-crimson flash at Grant Marsh Fishing Access Site on the Bighorn River meant this was going to be a good day for the two sportsmen stepping out of their pickup truck. But not for fishing. Instead of a leaping rainbow trout, the splash of color came from a rooster pheasant, and the two fellows were hunters, not anglers. With chaps attached and shotguns in hand, they quickly disappeared into a labyrinth of Russian olives and marsh grass behind an energetic springer spaniel. For an entire afternoon they plied 42 acres of fields, fence lines, and dry cattail sloughs without ever leaving the fishing access site.

Montana sportsmen and sportswomen have discovered that many fishing access sites comprise rich riparian bottomland and nearby upland grasslands—ideal habitat for white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, doves, wild turkeys, sandhill cranes, waterfowl, and pheasants. In late fall and early winter, hunters actually outnumber anglers at many fishing access sites.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has established 334 fishing access sites on rivers, creeks, ponds, and lakes across Montana. The sites provide free public access ro the state's waterways for fishing and other water-based recreation. They range from the sprawling 601-acre Henneberry Fishing Access Site on the Beaverhead River to the Yellowsrone River's Corwin Springs site, no bigger than a suburban residential lot. The access sites usually contain a cement boat ramp and a vault latrine. In addition to fishing, they provide places for people to hike, camp, and watch birds.

DENVERBRYAN.COM

The hunting can be tremendous. Because they abut water, fishing access sites often provide great waterfowling opportunities. Many also offer hunting for ringnecks and whitetails—two game species that prefer thick, dense cover near water.

Hunting opportunities and regulations vary widely from site

to site. Some are closed to hunting because they are too small to offer meaningful opportunities. Others, next to towns or neighboring farm buildings, limit hunters to shotguns or archery equipment. But hunting is legal on most fishing access sites. Hunters can learn about restrictions from signs posted at entrance roads and in the free "Fishing Access Site Field Guide," available at FWP regional offices, major sporting goods stores, and online at fwp.mt.gov. Hunters may also call FWP regional offices for hunting restrictions on specific sites.

Despite the great wildlife habitat there, fishing access sites are not purchased for their hunting potential. Allan Kuser, FWP's fishing access site coordinator in Helena, says the department's primary goal is to provide public access to water for angling. The department looks for sites where there is also room for a boat launch, latrine, parking, and shore fishing. But because the sites frequently include adjoining acreage in the purchase agreement, the public ends up with places for both fishing and land-based recreational access. "The hunting, hiking, and birding are bonus features," Kuser says.

For example, the 172-acre Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone Fishing Access Site was purchased in 2008 to give people a place to hand-launch boats, fish, floar, and play in the water along a mile of river frontage south of Bridger. The property also came with two irrigated farm fields, water rights, and a wide swath of bottomland thick with cottonwoods, willows, and cattails. One corner of the tract climbs into rimrocks and sagebrush benches where mule deer live. A local farmer plants the cultivated acreage with small grain crops each spring, which keeps noxious weeds under conrol and provides additional food for wildlife. Because of the rich, diverse habitat, visitors may see wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, red foxes, raccoons, and pheasants. Bird watchers love the site for the many resident and migrating species, and hikers enjoy the solitude.

Also along the Yellowstone River, the new Holmgren Fishing Access Site provides a stopover for rafters and anglers floating between Reed Point and Columbus. A mile of riverbank providing access to streamside fishing holes is flanked by a wide strip of river bottom that holds game birds, waterfowl, and deer.

Downstream from Billings, nearly every fishing access site along the Yellowstone River includes at least a patch of brush, a fence line, or an overgrown back channel—all conraining game birds and deer. Old wooden ttee stands at many sites are testament to the fact thar hunters used the properties long before FWP bought them for public fishing.

Kuser says hunrers can find game on fishing access sites across Montana. "They're often overlooked by hunrers because they're designated for fishing," he says. "But people should know they can hunt on most of these sites. It's public land."

Bob Gibson is FWP's regional Information and Education Program manager in Billings.

GET READY Above: Upland hunters wait for a rooster to erupt from ideal pheasant habitat at a fishing access site along the Bighorn River. Right: a successful hunter shows off his birds at a site along the Yellowstone. In addition to pheasants, fishing access sites hold sharptails, doves, wild turkeys, and, especially late in the season, ducks.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BOB GRESSUS FWP; TOM DAVIS FWP; MICHAEL FURMAN

IT'S TIME

After a lifetime of pursuing big game trophies from Missoula to Anchorage, 83-year-old Mavis Lorenz hands her rifle over to the next generation. BY NOELLE NAIDEN

In Montana, it's not unusual to meet a woman who hunts. But it is surprising to meet one who hunts on her own, has chased game animals for more than half a century, and has taken many big game trophies—including one of the largest bighorn sheep ever killed in Montana.

Mavis Lorenz, 83, is a woman of endless passions and interests. The Missoula resident has served on Montana's Private Lands/Public Wildlife Council, volunteered for a federal grizzly bear DNA study, and taught fishing to Missoula grade-schoolers. She has competed at the masters level in track and cross-country ski racing (the latter internationally), taught physical education at the University of Montana, and assisted with FWP's Becoming an Outdoors-Woman workshops. The 114-pound adventurer has also motorcycled through Mexico, kayaked Idaho's Lochsa River, rafted the Middle Fork of the Salmon River, and hiked extensively in Europe and Asia. In the 1970s, she earned her pilot's license.

In the meantime, she has hunted for almost every North American big game species, in Alaska and Canada but mostly Montana. "I love the different challenges hunting offers," Lorenz says. "One is trying to find an animal on its home ground and outfoxing that critter. You might not see what you're hunting for, but you'll always see something interesting if you go out."

Hunting has been Lorenz's sustaining heartbeat since she was a girl growing up in rural Wisconsin, where she was taught by her mother, a crack shot. "Oh could she shoot that .22," Lorenz says. "There wasn't a rabbit left in the garden after 24 hours when she picked up that gun." By age 12, Lorenz was allowed to take the family's .410 shotgun out by herself and hunt squirrels. "I had to go alone, because my folks thought two kids with a gun were riskier than one," she says.

COURTESY OF MAVIS LORENZ

ALASKA CARIBOU Lorenz has shot nearly every North American big game species.

During World War II, when commercially sold meat was rationed, hunting was a serious affair for Lorenz's family. "We'd start in the fall when the squirrels were big enough to eat," she says. "I was given only three shells. If I didn't bring a squirrel back, I was reprimanded. In our family, if you wanted to hunt you'd better get something, so I did."

Lorenz never lost that desire to succeed as a hunter. After moving to Montana in 1954 to teach at the University of Montana, she began hunting with a group of men who worked at the Bonner mill. One of her most memorable outdoors experiences was an elk hunt with the group. "We were up Ninemile Prairie in one guy's old station wagon," Lorenz says. "We ran into a small bunch of elk that crossed in front of us, and Blackie said, 'Who wants it?' I said, 'I do—and don't follow me!' There was a little grassy draw, and this elk was silhouetted on the other side. I sat down in the snow and peeled off a shot. It fell and slid down the hill. I kept shooting, and then I heard Blackie's voice, 'For God's sake, Mavis, stop shooting! It's dead!'"

Another unforgettable hunt was in the Rock Creek area, where, at age 66, Lorenz shot what at the time was the seventh largest bighorn sheep ever taken in Montana and the largest killed in the state by a woman. Lorenz says it took 18 years of applying before she finally drew the coveted bighorn ram permit. After reading everything she could find on Rock Creek bighorns, she obtained a video showing how to determine if a ram had trophy-sized horns. "I studied that video upside down and backwards," she says.

On the day Lorenz killed the ram, she stalked a group of three large sheep to within 60 yards. All three were facing her. "You have to judge the size of the hole in the curl, and to see how big the hole is, the sheep has to stand sideways," she says. When the middle ram finally turned, Lorenz saw it had the thick beam and extensive curl she'd learned to identify from the video. She aimed the rifle and squeezed the trigger. The Boone and Crockett certificate for the ram, which scored 200⅛, lies on the floor of her living room, next to a reproduction of the horn and a bookcase full of travelogues, topo maps, and hunting journals. The massive full-body mount adorns a wall at the Bob Ward store in Missoula.

Last fall Lorenz shot a cow elk in what was her final hunt. A remarkable woman with extraordinary physical gifts, she now has an autoimmune disease that depletes her energy. What's more, macular degeneration has deteriorated her vision, preventing her from seeing well enough to shoot an animal without the chance of wounding it.

"I can't even see the crosshairs on the scope," she says. "Nope, it's time. Time to hand my rifle off to someone younger." Lorenz tells me she plans to give the gun to her grandnephew.

Then she eyeballs me a moment and says, "You know, before I send that gun off to him, I could teach you how to handle it so you could go out in the fall."

Noelle Naiden is a writer in Missoula and a traditional longbow hunter.

A WOMAN IN MOTION In addition to killing what at the time was Montana's seventh largest bighorn ram (top left), Mavis Lorenz of Missoula has lived a dynamic life filled with (clockwise from top center) kayaking, duck hunting, elk hunting, track and field, teaching, and cross-country ski racing.

Hitting the Target

PULL! Montanans use shooting ranges for target practice, recreation, and competition. Hunters flock to ranges before the start of big game season to check the accuracy of their rifles. Above: Helena Trap Range. Right: Shooters check targets at a range near Troy.

FWP grants are helping communities create family-friendly shooting range facilities

BY DAVE CARTY

Dale Pfau wants people to know the Fish, Wildlife & Parks grant that Lewistown's Central Montana Shooting Complex received to expand its facilities was spent mainly to benefit families. "We have roughly 1,000 family memberships, which is about 3,500 people," says Pfau, a club member and owner of a local

sporting goods business. "That's a lot of people for this area, a lot of kids and their parents out at the complex shooting for recreation. The grant really helped us out."

Pfau says the Lewistown community had raised funds for a smaller shooting range. But an initial $75,000 FWP grant, matched by in-kind services worth more than $300,000 by a local contractor, allowed the club to expand its facility to create shooting features—including a sporting clays course and an outdoor rifle range up to 500 yards—that far larger cities would be proud to own.

According to Kurt Cunningham, who administers the FWP Montana Shooting Range Grant Program, the Lewistown facility is just one of dozens of new ranges built or refurbished statewide in recent years. Montana now has more than 150 shooting ranges, in all but nine of its 56 counties. Some are simply outdoor public areas where people can sight in their rifles before hunting season. Others, both public and private, offer a variety of ranges of different distances for rifles,

shotguns, pistols, muzzleloaders, and archery.

Cunningham says shooting ranges are extremely popular in Montana and across the United States. "Hunters use them to practice marksmanship, law enforcement personnel train there, and clubs hold competitions," he says. The ranges also provide recreation for families. "They give youth something to do, especially in many small towns where there's just not much else going on," says Cunningham. "Shooting is a life skill. And it's something people can work on if they want to get into competition.

"In a lot of small communities in Montana," he adds, "the shooting range is the most popular—and sometimes the only—family recreational facility."

Shooting ranges got a big boost in 1999 when the Montana legislature put into law an existing FWP grant program that uses hunting license revenue to help clubs, local governments, and school districts develop and improve their shooting facilities. Lawmakers continue to strongly support the FWP shooting range program, providing it with an additional $300,000 each year in state funds. Most of the FWP grants require 50:50 matches from the local community, which can be in the form of cash or donated in-kind work.

Like most grants, the FWP money comes with stipulations to ensure it is spent appropriately. Adele Stenson, a 4-H extension agent who helped the Conrad community apply for a grant, believes the process is well worth the effort. She says the new Pondera Shooting Sports Complex in Conrad includes wheelchair access on the trap range and a large, heated building that houses archery, air rifle, and pistol ranges. All the ranges are seeing increased use by the local 4-H kids she works with, Stenson says. "It's all about giving the kids around here something fun and rewarding to do with their time."

As in many communities, Conrad-area residents pitched in to help build the new facility. "It was like an old-fashioned barn raising," Cunningham says.

Both private and public clubs can apply for FWP grants. Private groups must be nonprofit and allow public use for a "reasonable fee," according to state statutes. "Or they can require a membership, but the membership has to be open to anyone who qualifies for a Montana hunting license," says Cunningham. Many private ranges are open to the public for a small fee before the big game hunting season so hunters can sight in their rifles.

Shooting clubs across Montana benefit from the state grants. In Glasgow, Valley County Rifle and Pistol Club board member Darrell Morehouse says his group's recently completed shooting range was sorely needed. "The city had a place to shoot, but it was basically just shooting into a hillside," he says. Using a $20,000 grant from another source and a $48,000 FWP grant matched with donated labor from the community, the club built a covered rifle and pistol range. "The grant from FWP was definitely impor-

Dave Carty is a freelance writer in Bozeman.

FUN AND REWARDING YOUTH SPORT 4-H members preparing for competition work on their air rifle marksmanship at the new Pondera Shooting Sports Complex in Conrad.

MONTANA FWP

Montana shooting ranges

Montana now has over 150 shooting ranges, at least one in all but nine of the state's 56 counties. FWP grants, composed of hunting license dollars and state funds, help shooting clubs and civic organizations build and improve ranges. For information on shooting ranges near you, visit fwp.mt.gov and search for "shooting ranges."

MONTANA FWP

SHOTS HEARD 'ROUND THE STATE Clockwise from top left: Broadwater Rod and Gun Club, Townsend; 3-D outdoor archery shoot at the Five Valleys Archery Club range, Missoula; aerial view of skeet ranges in Libby; artistic iron sign at the Denton Rod & Gun Club; Lewistown's Central Montana Shooting Complex; sighting in a rifle at the Great Falls Shooting Sports Complex; muzzleloader shooter at the Deep Creek range, near Missoula; indoor shooting lanes at the Greenway Range, Bozeman.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MONTANA FWP; COURTESY FIVE VALLEYS ARCHERY CLUB; MONTANA FWP; MONTANA FWP; MONTANA FWP; NEAL & MJ MISHLER; JOE VOGEL; GLENN BRADBURY

tant for getting this project off the ground," says Morehouse. "It's a great program."

Four hundred miles to the west, Don Clark of the Libby Rod and Gun Club says the group used its FWP grant to create a full-service shooting and education facility. "We had a dream of building a place for hunter education, bowhunter education, and rifle education for the kids," says Clark, club president. The club received a $43,000 FWP shooting range grant, which, along with donated labor from club members, helped build a 1,250-square-foot education facility for classes and shooting sports activities. "We got it done last October, even though a few of our volunteers 'deserted' us at the start of the bow season," he says, laughing.

Cunningham says local donations and volunteer work is part of what makes the shooting range grant program so successful. "It's more than just groups using public funds to fix up recreational facilities," he says. "These are huge community efforts. People put their heart and soul into planning the range, doing the paperwork to apply for the grants, raising matching funds, and then seeing the projects through to completion. Communities have a great deal of ownership [in the shooting ranges]. They're a real pride and joy for a lot of towns."

WALK A MILE IN MY

A new FWP project helps hunters and landowners understand each other's perspective on issues related to public hunting on private land. BY SCOTT MCMILLION

BOOTS

SHARED PERSPECTIVE A new FWP program uses an interactive website to help public hunters and private landowners discover how much they have in common.

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Like the wind and the sky, hunting permeates Montana lifestyles. Dedicated hunters live and breathe hunting. For them, hunting season is the peak of the year. Hunting helps drive Montana's economy. It shapes our culture. It connects generations of families, helps us understand our vast natural world, and fills our freezers.

But the future of hunting in Montana depends on the continuing cooperation between landowners and hunters. In recent years, finding a place to hunt has become increasingly difficult for many hunters. Gone are the days when a hunter could jump a covey of Huns and pursue them at will, or when a hunter was surprised by a landowner who said, "Sorry, I don't allow hunting."

In Montana, as in all of North America, wildlife belongs to no single person but rather is held in trust by the state for all people—the public. But there's a hitch. Private individuals or businesses own two-thirds of Montana. And when a hunter shows up at the door in an orange vest asking to hunt, landowners have the right to say yes or no.

Unfortunately, more of them are saying no. Land ownership patterns are changing, with more property being held for private recreational use. Individuals or groups are leasing many farms and ranches for their own hunting. Some gates are closing because landowners have had bad experiences with hunters, or they've heard of somebody else's bad experience. They might be concerned that hunters will spread weeds, damage roads, or disturb livestock. Maybe they just relish their privacy. They don't have to explain.

But decreasing access may soon result in fewer people deciding to hunt, which could mean long-term problems for landowners, wildlife, and Montana's hunting traditions. Public hunting is the most effective way to control big game populations. Unmanaged herds of deer, elk, and other large wildlife can extensively damage agricultural lands and natural habitat. And populations can become so concentrated and overabundant they become vulnerable to diseases.

Hunters and landowners traditionally have much more in common than they have as differences. Both groups share a keen interest in Montana's land and wildlife, depend on a healthy and sustainable landscape, and work or hunt in the cold, heat, mud, and other features of a natural landscape.

So where does that leave hunters and landowners—Montanans who need each other but often fail to understand each other?

One step in the right direction would be for hunters and landowners to see the other's perspective, to walk a little in each other's boots. That's what a new on-line program developed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks aims to do. Named the Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Project, the interactive website is designed to help landowners and hunters discover how much they have in common. The site presents ideas and tools each can use to identify acceptable hunter behaviors and build better relationships.

"So many of the discussions about public access end up with people throwing grenades at each other, and there is no progress," says FWP Education Program manager Thomas Baumeister, who helped design the new project. "We are trying to move things along, to give hunters who want to get past all these ideological barriers something to work on, for them to engage in." Adds Alan Charles,

CHUCKNGALEROBBINS.COM

PERMISSION GRANTED The new FWP program teaches that hunting private land is a privilege, not a right.

FWP landowner-sportsman coordinator and the project's other architect: "We want to foster better understanding on both sides of the fence." That, in turn, could reduce conflicts over public access and lead to more open gates and stronger bonds between hunters and landowners.

Fun and easy to learn

Here's how the program works: Participants log onto FWP's website at fwp.mt.gov and click on the "Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Project" icon under the "For Hunters" category. They are directed to an interactive website containing information on topics such as obtaining permission, retrieving game, hunting ethically, and preventing litter and wildfire. Then there's a voluntary test, where participants take a stab at several multiple-choice and short essay questions.

Some questions have no right or wrong answer but are instead meant to encourage contemplation. "[The on-line course] makes you stop and think," says Brett Todd, a landowner, hunter, and outfitter from Big Timber. "I can't imagine anybody who completes it would not have a different mindset about their own personal hunting."

Dan Clark, a hunter from Helena, says he already knew much of the material on the website but learned a few new things. For example, he was aware that if a mortally wounded animal crosses a boundary into posted land, Montana law forbids retrieving the carcass without permission. What Clark didn't know is that hunters who find themselves in such a situation may call a game warden and ask him or her to help arrange permission to retrieve the animal.

Charles notes that hunting and agriculture have much in common, such as outdoors skills, connections with animals, and habitat protection. But as the nation becomes more urbanized, more and more hunters lack rural backgrounds that in years past helped them understand the concerns of landowners. "At the same time, farmers and ranchers may not know about easy ways they can reduce problems associated with allowing public hunting," he says. "This new project gives both hunters and landowners information they will find beneficial."

Hunters are reminded to not litter, keep their dogs from bothering landowners, and prevent the spread of weeds. The course also has tips on how they can help landowners, such as by offering to report trespassers or fires.

For Montana landowners, the website offers advice on how to handle permission seekers, manage hunter numbers, and make ranch regulations clearly understood. "It's easier for hunters to follow the rules when they know what they are," Charles says. Other tips include mowing parking areas to reduce fire danger, designating open and closed routes to reduce road damage, and marking gates that need to remain open or closed.

Those who complete the course earn a certificate, bumper sticker, and cap verifying their participation. "If you see those caps out there, you know the hunters took the time to complete the course," says Charles.

The headache season

For many hunters, fall is the highlight of the year. For landowners, hunting season can mean the annual return of old friends from town and out of state, but it can also cause headaches.

Mac White, of Two Dot, provides about 800 hunter-days of use on his sprawling central Montana ranch. "Every year, I get hundreds of people knocking on my door, wanting to hunt," White says. He tries to manage the numbers and keep people spread out, and he has rules he expects hunters to obey. For example, hunter sign-in is between 7 a.m. and 9:30 a.m.; during the rest of the day, White has a ranch to run. And starting this fall, people who want to hunt on his ranch need to show him a Stewardship Project certificate. "It's a way to filter the numbers a little bit," White says. "If they don't want to spend the time to get the certificate, they can hunt elsewhere."

Chuck Hyatt, a hunter education instructor from Circle, says that even in his isolated part of the state there is increasingly less access to private land as property changes hands. His two young sons have already completed the Hunter-Landowner Stewardship Project course, and he plans to use it in his hunter ed classes. He's hoping his students will also take the project's main messages home to their parents. "A lot of people take it for granted, but it's a privilege to go out there and hunt on private land," Hyatt says. "We need to open the lines of communication, and this program sends a message that hunters are trying."

Scott McMillion, of Livingston, is a freelance writer and a senior editor for Montana Quarterly.

Hunter Landowner
STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

Brown trout

Salmo trutti

By Tom Dickson

It's hard enough being a hunter this time of year, what with archery, backcountry deer and elk, pronghorn, waterfowl, and upland bird seasons opening one after another. But now is also when big browns become especially aggressive and wildly attack streamers. Hard as it might be, especially for my sad-eyed springer spaniel, I sometimes forego hunting a few days each fall to cast Woolly Buggers at surly browns lurking along riverbanks.

ORIGINS

Unlike native bull, cutthroat, and redband trout, browns first arrived in the West during the late 1800s as part of federal stocking programs. The fish were imported from Germany and Scotland's Loch Leven. (Some old-timers still refer to them as German browns or Loch Leven browns.) Brown trout were stocked in waters of Yellowstone National Park, from which they migrated north along the Yellowstone River into Montana. State fisheries managers later began aggressive stocking efforts in other rivers and lakes. Montana stopped stocking most rivers in the early 1970s after learning that the trout were naturally self-sustaining.

RANGE

Brown trout live in central and southwestern Montana in valley streams and rivers such as the Madison and Big Hole as well as in many reservoirs and lakes. They usually coexist with rainbow trout. Because browns can survive in warmer, murkier water, they are often more abundant than rainbows farther downstream, such as below Saint Xavier on the Bighorn.

MATING SEASON

Unlike spring-spawning cutthroats and rainbows, browns—along with bull trout and brookies—spawn in fall. During spawning season, the male's lower jaw develops a hook at the tip, called a kype, which fits into a groove that forms in the upper jaw. Biologists think males use their kype as a weapon to fight off rival males; it may also attract females, like a bull elk's antlers or a sage-grouse's fanned tail.

IDENTIFICATION

A brown trout has an olive back, and the fish's golden sides, often described as buttery colored, are covered with black and red spots, often with pale halos.

"INTELLIGENCE"

Any angler knows that browns are harder to catch than other trout species. But are they smarter? According to trout biology guru Robert J. Behnke, the brown's brain is no larger or otherwise different from those of other trout. He speculates that the answer lies in the brown trout's aversion to light and adaptation to murkier water. "The retina…is better adapted to optimally function in dim light," he wrote in a 1986 column in *Trout* magazine. "Thus, browns are more oriented to dense cover and shaded areas such as deep undercut banks, and more prone to nocturnal feeding."

That's not to say browns can't be caught at noon on sunny days out in the open. But in such conditions it's more likely that a rainbow or cutthroat trout will take your fly than a brown.

SIZE

Once browns reach 14 inches or so, they begin eating fish as well as aquatic insects. This protein boost allows them to reach large sizes in many rivers. For instance, the trout silhouettes lining the wall of Dan Bailey's Fly Shop in Livingston attest to the massive browns caught on the Yellowstone. It's rare for trout to live long enough to top 10 pounds. They usually die of old age after four or five years, though a few can survive ten years or more. Brown trout grow larger in lakes than in rivers. Montana's state record is a 29-pounder caught in Wade Lake in 1966.

CONSERVATION

Though they have displaced native cutthroat trout and arctic grayling in some waters, brown trout are extremely popular with anglers. The best way to conserve brown trout is by ensuring the fish have adequate stream flows, cool water, silt-free spawning gravel, and abundant habitat such as pools, riffles, and overhead cover.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

PARTING SHOT

SHATTERED. A clay pigeon explodes from a well-placed shot. FWP grants are helping communities across Montana build and improve shooting ranges for shotgun, rifle, pistol, and archery. See our story on page 34. Photo by Dušan Smetana.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

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